

In Memoriam

As long as American troops continue to be killed in Iraq, artist Jane Hammond will honor them in an open-ended installation.

BY FAYE HIRSCH

A generation of men is like a generation of leaves; the wind scatters some leaves upon the ground, while others the burgeoning wood brings forth—and the season of spring comes on. So of men one generation springs forth and another ceases. —Homer, *The Iliad*

Jane Hammond, an artist who has never followed an easy path in her labor-intensive works on paper, presently spends two full days a week, with two assistants, working on her piece *Fallen*. Begun in 2004, the year after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, it now comprises more than 3,800 digital prints in the shapes of autumn leaves, heaped on a low (15-inch-high) platform. Each of the leaves represents an American soldier killed in Iraq during the war and occupation. Thus *Fallen* is, tragically, an ongoing work, steadily accumulating in its parts, remanded to incompleteness by a government bent on defying the popular will. (The platform has grown, too, from an original length of 12 feet to, now, nearly 24 by 7½ feet).

The work's open-endedness persists despite the fact that, in early 2007, it was purchased by the Whitney Museum, where it was on view for several months this fall and winter. An acquisition, if anything, should



Jane Hammond's Fallen, 2004-ongoing, recto and verso color inkjet prints from digital files, matt medium, jade glue, sumi ink, acrylic paint, gouache, fiberglass strand and handmade cotton rag paper, 15 by 286 by 90 inches; at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis. Photos this article courtesy the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Left, detail photo Stan Strembicki.



provide the clearest kind of closure for an artist, yet this particular work continues to demand Hammond's attention and resources. Various donors have contributed to a fund for *Fallen*, administered by the Whitney, which helps the artist defray her expenses. *Fallen* has begun a cross-country tour. Currently in St. Louis at the Mildred Lane Kemper Museum at Washington University (through Apr. 23), it travels to the Wexner Center in Columbus later this spring, and will wind up at some future date at the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego, a city that hosts the largest military base in the world. The specifics of the itinerary are still under discussion.

Hammond struggles to keep up with the official count of the Amer-

ican war dead, at this writing edging toward 4,000. (The reported number includes only soldiers killed on the battlefield, leaving out those who perish later from their wounds.) Each autumn since beginning *Fallen*, Hammond has collected leaves; bringing them home, she stores them in snap-and-seal bags to prevent their deterioration. Once selected for reproduction, a leaf is scanned, mapped front over back, and its image printed out in color on a single sheet of paper, recto and verso—a precision act, since the front and back have to be precisely matched in order for the leaf form to be cut out as a single unit. The cutting is itself no mean feat, due to serrated

continued on page 178

Hammond

continued from page 133

and scalloped edges, narrow stems and holes, tears and other imperfections—all of which are reproduced. The edges are touched up by hand to match the adjacent colors on the surfaces, as well as to eliminate any traces of the white paper, and there are other hand additions in gouache, acrylic and sumi ink. Hammond then writes on it the name of a dead soldier. Fortified with transparent medium, jade glue and fiberglass, and molded and creased to resemble the original, the digitized leaf joins its fellows on the pile. Each of the prints is based on a separate, real-life leaf; the artist makes no duplicates.

Hammond has never before created politically topical work, and her subject matter is normally more cryptic. But the idea for *Fallen* came to her simple and complete, as her works sometimes do, in a dream. In it she was walking through the woods where, as leaves dropped to the ground, she noticed that each carried a soldier's name. In reality, she was headed out the next day to visit a friend in Connecticut, and for the first two autumns that's where she found her leaves. She has since cast a wider net, gathering leaves from all over the country. She keeps a list of the trees; they include all manner of maples and oaks, American horse chestnut, sweet gum, silver linden, catalpa, birch, black alder and so forth. She brought a botanical guide with her to Central Park, and has for the first time learned about the many specimens growing there, though she has lived in New York for most of her life and has a curiosity about such things.

Oddly, the piece, conceived oneirically, has attracted coincidences. One of these occurred while it was first on view at Lelong Gallery in Chelsea, in spring 2005. In an uptown Starbucks, a woman who had recently lost her son in Iraq overheard some people talking about *Fallen*. Finding the gallery, the woman entered the room where the piece was installed and, looking down, immediately spotted the small

For one mother, *Fallen* became a public acknowledgment of the sort that has been notoriously absent during the Iraqi conflict.

brown leaf that bears her son's name—improbably enough, given that there were already more than 1,500 leaves in the pile. And, as it turns out, the source of the leaf, Connecticut, is where the boy grew up. During the course of the installation of *Fallen* at Lelong, the woman would come each Friday to the gallery, and an assistant would bring her a chair to sit on nearby. Unexpectedly, the piece had become, for this woman at least, a public acknowledgement of the sort that has been notoriously absent during the Iraqi conflict. Rarely does the public see images of flag-draped coffins, and the particulars of our military losses are, at best, buried in the back pages of newspapers.

Senator John McCain, the leading candidate for the Republican presidential nomination, responded testily to a question posed at a Jan. 8 press conference, declaring that a 100-year U.S. presence in Iraq “will be fine with me.” One might well wonder how a century-long involvement would affect *Fallen*. At the very least, one suspects its resonance as a memorial will only deepen with each passing week, as the U.S. occupation continues and the pile mounts. □

Fallen is currently at the Mildred Lane Kemper Museum at Washington University in St. Louis, Mo. [through Apr. 23]. It travels to the Wexner Center, Ohio State University, Columbus [May 9-Aug. 12], with further destinations and scheduling to be announced. A survey exhibition of the artist's prints, drawings and photographs, “Jane Hammond: Paper Work,” has been traveling for two years; organized by the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, it will open at the de Young, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, on May 3 [through Aug. 31] and will make a final stop at the Detroit Institute of Arts [Oct. 1, 2008-Jan. 10, 2009].